

Launch of Blackwater Broadband Services

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August 5, 2010

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Blackwater, Virginia

I am pleased to return to Lee County today to mark another major success in our effort to expand high-speed Internet services throughout Southwest Virginia.

Today, we formally launch the Blackwater community's new broadband service, a project which will make available affordable, high-speed Internet services to 90 residents and businesses. Additionally, a new public Internet access site connected to the new broadband network has been established here at the Blackwater Post Office.

More than fifteen years ago, I encouraged local governments throughout the Ninth District to find a means of deploying broadband networks so that affordable high-speed Internet access would be available to businesses and residents throughout our region. My goal in making this recommendation was to set our region apart in comparison to other rural areas of the nation, to make us more attractive than the typical rural region to industries looking to expand their operations into new locations, and to create technology-based jobs for Southwest Virginians.

Today, I am pleased to note that many of the communities in our region, and in Lee County in particular, are making great strides in the deployment of broadband networks. In January, we launched high-speed Internet services in the community of St. Charles in Lee County, last year we launched services in Ewing, and two years ago, we launched services in Rose Hill. The new broadband services that begin today in Blackwater will mark another major step forward in our efforts to ensure high speed Internet access is available to Lee County residents.

The broadband services now available in Blackwater have been established with the assistance of a grant of \$759,600 provided at my urging by the U.S. Department of Agriculture through its Rural Utilities Service Community Connect broadband grant program. For the last several years, I have encouraged communities throughout our region to seek federal funds from this program, and I am pleased to report that we have secured a total of more than \$2 million for the broadband services in Rose Hill, Ewing, St. Charles, and now Blackwater.

With assistance of the federal grant of \$759,600 for the Blackwater community, 90 residents and businesses now have access to high-speed Internet services. In addition, the Blackwater Community Computer Center, which opens today, has been established to provide free high speed Internet access to residents at convenient times.

The Blackwater Community Computer Center includes 10 new computer workstations outfitted with the latest computer equipment. The Center provides high-speed Internet services to residents without charge six days a week. Additionally, the new Center provides free computer and Internet training workshops for those with limited computer experience on Monday mornings at 11:00 AM and on Thursday evenings at 7:00 PM.

With the benefit of the federal grant, LENOWISCO has deployed more than 18 miles of fiber optic cable from its Internet backbone over the “last mile” to the homes and businesses in Blackwater. The services just recently became available, and already sixteen homes and businesses have connected to the network.

In addition, high speed Internet services have been provided at no cost for the next two years to the Blackwater Volunteer Fire Department, and a community website for Blackwater has been established. You can visit the new community site at www.blackwaterva.org.

Just as first canals, then railroads and then highways were the major arteries of commerce in earlier eras, in the 21st Century, access to broadband will be a defining feature of economic success for rural communities. Step by positive step our expanding broadband infrastructure is assuring that Southwest Virginia's communities will be at the center of economic opportunity.

I would like to take this opportunity to recognize a number of individuals without whom the success we celebrate today would not have been possible.

I want to thank Skip Skinner, Executive Director of LENOWISCO, and his excellent staff for their outstanding efforts to expand the region's infrastructure and to maintain the region's broadband networks.

I would also like to thank Paul Elswick, with Sunset Digital Communications, for his work to bring Internet services to the region.

Richard Jenkins, the Regional Field Representative for the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Rural Utilities Service, deserves our recognition today for his efforts to secure the federal grant funds necessary for the project.

I would like to thank the Virginia Tobacco Commission for providing matching funds in the amount of \$125,000 to assist with the project. Delegate Terry Kilgore is the Chairman of the Commission, and I would like to thank him for his leadership and foresight in supporting our region's broadband infrastructure. I also want to thank Senator Wampler, who represents this area in the State Senate, for joining us today and for his efforts to promote broadband expansion throughout our region.

I also want to thank Kenny Osborne, Chief of the Blackwater Fire Department, for joining us today and offer him congratulations on the new broadband services. Chris Begley, another property owner in the Blackwater community is joining us today, and I would also like to thank him for his efforts.

Finally, I would like to recognize Laura Lee, my Deputy Chief of Staff, for the work she has performed for this project. I place a high priority in my office in obtaining successes much like the one we celebrate today, and Laura's work is vital to our efforts to deploy new broadband technology throughout Southwest Virginia.

The broadband services now available in Blackwater are an example of what can be achieved when citizens and government officials at the local, state and federal levels work together and cooperate in aid of a common purpose. For that cooperation and successful work in providing high speed Internet service for the Blackwater community, I want to commend all here and offer special congratulations to the residents who are receiving this service.